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ABSTRACT

In response to increasing incidents of racism on college campuses, an undergraduate course was developed to facilitate learning about racial relationships in a proactive manner. While universities promote student development in many ways through the formal and informal curriculum, aspects of social, emotional and ethical growth are generally viewed as the responsibility of student life divisions. This course represented an effort to merge the concerns of the academic and university life communities with a learning experience that would facilitate emotional and intellectual growth. The course included traditional academic requirements as well as an experiential component, in which undergraduates collaborated with graduate students and ethnic minority middle-school students in conducting field research and in facilitating career development discussion groups in an urban middle school. Of the two class meetings per week, one was held at the university and involved critical discussion among the undergraduates of the literature on youth unemployment. The second class session each week was held at the middle school and involved career development discussion in groups, each group consisting of two or three middle school students, one undergraduate and one graduate student (in Counseling Psychology). Undergraduates were also responsible for keeping a journal, collaborating on a field research project, and preparing a literature review and final report on the area of field research. Pre and post-course questionnaires (completed by the undergraduate and graduate students, middle school students and school administrators) suggested that this course assisted undergraduates in dispelling some stereotypical images and in developing feelings of increased competence and decreased anxiety in interacting with ethnic minority youth. (Author/KM)

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Facilitating Racial Appreciation Through The Formal Curriculum

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HE 022 504

Abstract

In response to increasing incidents of racism on college campuses, an undergraduate course was developed to facilitate learning about racial relationships in a proactive manner. While universities promote student development in many ways through the formal and informal curriculum, aspect of social, emotional and ethical growth are generally viewed as the responsibility of student life divisions. This course represented an effort to merge the concerns of the academic and university life communities with a learning experience that would facilitate emotional and intellectual growth. The course included traditional academic requirements as well as an experiential component, in which undergraduates collaborated with graduate students and ethnic minority middle school students in conducting field research and in facilitating career development discussion groups in an urban middle school. Pre and post-course questionnaires suggest that this course assisted undergraduates in dispeling some stereotypical images and developing feelings of increased competence and decreased anxiety in interactions with ethnic minority youth.

Facilitating Racial Appreciation Through the Formal Curriculum

In recognition of increasing racial tensions on campuses across the United States (Levine,1987), the faculty in Professional Psychology (Counseling and School Psychology) at the University of Pennsylvania began to consider ways of facilitating increased appreciation of racial and ethnic diversity among the student body. We were aware of the academic knowledge base within the School of Education concerning issues of diversity and group processes and regretted the way in which traditional distinctions between academic and student life functions and graduate and undergraduate education had limited our impact on the quality of undergraduate life. We sought to use our academic and applied knowledge, as psychologists and educators, and liaisons with personnel in student affairs to develop an integrated and proactive intervention.

As a preparatory step, we requested a planning grant from the Undergraduate Education Fund at the University of Pennsylvania to aid in completing a review of relevant published theory and research and in consulting with academic deans, faculty, administrators, and student affairs personnel. As as result of this planning phase, I developed an undergraduate course, entitled "Career Development of Urban Youth," which was offered through the continued support of the Undergraduate Education Fund.

THE COURSE

Planning Phase

The student development literature and interviews with university personnel provided a number of ideas that strongly affected the development and structure of the course. The belief was expressed that students on our campus were isolated from the surrounding urban community and thus had insufficient opportunity to learn about the lives of those who differed from themselves in socioeconomic, ethnic and racial ways. Secondly, interviews with student life personnel suggested that the effectiveness of student affairs sponsored seminars to promote appreciation of diversity were limited because students and academic departments gave less attention and legitimacy to activities not offered for academic credit.. As a result, I decided that our program should be delivered through a formal course structure and should involve undergraduate students in direct experiences with diverse individuals. Experiential learning would be combined with more traditional academic requirements, such as assigned readings, class discussion and a research paper. Support for integrating cognitive and affective learning was also provided by the student development literature (Astin, 1985), which suggests that education is more satisfying for students when they are committed both intellectually and emotionally. While aspects of emotional, social and ethical growth are generally viewed as the repoonsibility of student life divisions, this course represented an effort to merge the concerns of the academic and university life communities through a learning experience that would facilitate emotional and intellectual growth.

Course Structure

Career Development of Urban Youth was designed to increase knowledge and sensitivity regarding the social, psychological, political, and economic issues that affect the career development of young people in our inner city schools. I believed that college students who were concerned with their own career development would identify with minority youth considering these issues, while at the same time being keenly aware of the ways in which their own lives differed from those of the youth with whom they were working.

The course met twice a week. One class session, which was held at the university and attended by undergraduate students, involved the critical discussion of theoretical works, research articles, policy statements and biographical writings concerning the causes, impact, and proposed solutions regarding youth unemployment. The assigned readings were intended to provide the undergraduate students with a scholarly base of knowledge, while also increasing their appreciation of the lives of urban disadvantaged youth. Structural and social explanations for youth unemployment, for example, were expected to diminish views that 'blame the victim." (Fine, 1986). Students were also helped to view disadvantaged youth as displaying needs for maturity and recognition similar to their own, but having fewer and often less constructive ways of meeting those needs (Williams & Kornblum, 1975).

The experiential component of the course was structured as a team approach, in which an undergraduate student, a graduate student in Counseling Psychology who was enrolled in a graduate level course in Career Development,

and urban middle school students participated in career development discussions. The career development groups were held at the middle school each week during our second class meeting. Each group contained two or three middle school students, one undergraduate and one graduate student. Undergraduates were also responsible for maintaining a journal concerning their experiences, collaborating with the graduate student and middle school student in designing a field research project related to the career development of urban youth, and preparing a literature review and final report related to the area of field research. Topics for field research included a follow-up of some recent graduates, an investigation of attitudes and needs of neighborhood employers, an evaluation of the high school options available to students from that middle school.

Evaluation

The course was evaluated by undergraduate and graduate students through the completion of pre- and post-course questionnaires. Middle school students and school administrators were interviewed to obtain their evaluation of the experience.

Prior to their involvement in the field experience, undergraduates expressed a moderate amount of anxiety about the anticipated experience. They expressed fears that the students would be disinterested in the discussions and unmanageable and perhaps even violent. After meeting with the middle school students for one academic semester, the undergraduates reported decreased anxiety and increased feelings of competence concerning their interactions with the youth. The undergraduates found the youth to be different in many ways than

they had expected. Contrary to expectations, undergraduates experienced the youth as interested and motivated. Descriptions of the urban youth provided by the undergraduates included "bright," and "hungry for knowledge," although most had classified as learning disabled.. The undergrduates reported that their fellow group members looked forward to the individual attention they received in the group and responded positively to the opportunity to express their ideas. Most of the youth expressed high aspirations for the future. They were very curious about college life and indicated parental support for college attendance, but had very limited notions of what college life is like. While many of the youth, as expected, came from single parent homes, many shared our discussion with a concerned adult outside of school, who expressed support for the students's goals and aspirations.

Involvement in this experience clearly helped the undergraduates to look beyond stereotypical images of inner city youth and I believe, to gain increased appreciation of their lives My experience with this class strengthens my belief that the concerns of academic and student life can be creatively addressed through the formal curriculum. The opportunity to work closely with a graduate student in developing research and counseling skills was also a unique feature of this experience for undergraduates and a valued part of their learning. Evaluations of the experience provided by graduate students, middle school students and administrators were also enthusiastic.

Limitations

This course was a productive experience for most involved. The positive nature of this experience may be due to the special characteristics, interest, enthusiasm and interpersonal skill of this group of graduate and undergraduate students, or to the cooperation and motivation of this class of inner city middle school youth. Some of the fears of our undergraduates could easily have been realized under different circumstances. The challenge of helping undergraduates achieve understanding would have been different had the inner city youth been less responsive or even hostile. The undergraduates who particpated in this course did so voluntarily. While it is likely, therefore, that this contributed to the success of the course, the problem of how to change racial attitudes and behaviors among the undergraduates who would not elect such a course remains. If a "diversity" course were to become a requirement for all students, as was recently considered at this university, it is not clear whether undergraduates enrolled on a madatory basis would profit from the experience as this willing group did. Whether this kind of involvement with inner city minority youth will impact upon student attitudes and behavior towards racially diverse groups on campus is not known. Several of the undergraduates volunteered to work with the youth as tutors. A mentoring program was established to continue involvment with other youth. For others, however, this brief experience will have no follow-up component.

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